

NEAR EAST OBSERVERS FOXHOLE HISTORY IRAQ AND THE T-72 TANK

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The T-72 Soviet tank took the Middle East by storm and was quickly adopted by many nations in the region. While countries such as Iraq had quantities of British Centurian and Chieftain tanks provided by England after the Second World War and especially as a result of overproduction in the Korean War, they slowly began to shift over to purely Soviet designed tanks and this brought with it both the advantages and the disadvantages of adopting a single tank design, and Soviet equipment in general.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

As with all Soviet tanks, the Type 72 tank was an improved version of the Type 64 which had been introduced in the 1960s and had undergone revisions to the point of transforming into a fully new type. The T-72 had a crew of three-men and featured an improved 125mm gun barrel. Arms also included a coaxial PKT machine gun with a 12.7mm anti-aircraft gun. The

tank's armor thickness remains unclear but the improvements were noticeable and was thick enough to serve as a Main Battle Tank (MBT) for the Soviet, Warsaw Pact, and many Middle East countries. The tank could achieve a speed of 50mph and, as such, provided the tank with rapid maneuver capability and challenged the speeds of contemporary American designs. The tank could go 310 miles between fueling. The main improvements in the design were less in the shape and appearance and more towards the chassis, the tank was provided with six road wheels and a rear sprocket with an idler in the front portion of the tank. This improved performance over rough terrain, giving it greater ability to run over obstacles and changes in contour, basically it could handle bumps and changes in the road and off-road environment as it was more flexible and less rigid. The M1A1 Abrams was designed in order to meet the challenge of this new arrival on the field.

IRAQ AND THE T-72

TANK



T-72

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tank was also widely used in Iraqi armor. The T-72 was not purchased as much as the Type-55 tank (to be discussed in a future Foxhole History),

however, it saw extensive service in the Iran – Iraq War and then in the Gulf War. It would be so prominent and abundant that H Norman Schwarzkopf would make note of it in his book, *It Doesn't Take A Hero*. He labeled Iraq a 'Soviet arms bazar', seeing weapons of all descriptions in Iraqi service. The T-72 was relegated to serving mostly as mobile artillery during both the Iran – Iraq War and the Persian Gulf, or Kuwait War. The Iraqi servicemen routinely buried the tanks in firing pits and elevated the gun upwards in a low arch in order to cast the shell beyond the front lines. The tanks thus remained fixed and immobile. Along with posing threats to the engines and the gas in them solidifying, there was no use of maneuvering skills or opportunities to directly attack the enemy. Thus, the Iran – Iraq War came to have the same static and almost immobile character as the First World War on the Western Front.

In the Gulf War, or the Kuwait War, the same tactic of buried, immobile artillery took over and significantly met with a force which had long been inculcated with a tradition of mobile tank warfare and this was illustrated in no better manner than the collision of forces at 73 Easting which became the largest armed confrontation of the Gulf War and, the only time Iraqi armor exchanged any fire with American armor. However, with the tanks buried in the sand and being unable to dislodge themselves in fight it became the land version of the Marianas Turkey Shoot in which tank after tank was destroyed by accurate American fire. The total number of Iraqi tanks which were destroyed in that battle came to over 39. The battle was very lopsided and in

the first few minutes 13 of the first visible tanks were taken out. It was apparent that the Iraqi army had not conducted any training, many Iraqi shots landed in the dirt in front of Bradley's and American tanks, this while sabot rounds quickly pierced and destroyed Iraqi tanks on contact.

It is elements like this that make the victory of American forces in that war a little less illustrative and less reliable for measure true combat effectiveness. The non-existent training of the Iraqi crews provided no real measure of the tank's capabilities but, it did demonstrate that, had there been a land confrontation in Europe between American and Soviet forces it is likely that the Russians would have lost a tremendous number of tanks in those battles.

Military and Society

While Saddam Hussein strongly emphasized armor, making four out of seven divisions of the Republican Guard Armor / Mechanized, the role of the Iraqi tank operator does not appear to have elevated their status within the ranks.



Despite significant research efforts to speak to former Iraqi servicemembers to ask questions about their status in the army as well as in society in general as a result of operating tanks, no answers have been forthcoming. Certainly a large number of them have not only retired but may not have

access to the internet or may be still deeply infused with a sense of fear about speaking of their role in the army during that period. At this point, it can only be surmised that there was some elevation of the status of the members of the Republican Guard which were given top of the line, well operating tanks and equipment. These units were primarily formed for the defense of the government, serving as protection from both foreign adversaries as well as internal insurrection. But, it appears that this elevation was a function of their role in the Republican Guard and not specifically linked to their status as tank / armor operators. Those serving outside of the Republican Guard have been immeasurably silent and their status vis a vis their role as tank operators is equally unclear.



A T-72 tank on display in the office of Near East Observers